Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology by Eugene Peterson. Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 2005. 368 pages, including back matter.

> "There comes a time for most of us when we discover a deep desire within us to live from the heart what we already know in our heads and do with our hands. But 'to whom shall we go?'" –Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*

It's a commonplace that Christian spirituality is not what it used to be. Then again, it never was—just read Paul's letters to Corinth, for example. Nevertheless, each age has its particular challenges. The besetting problem for Christians in the industrialized West has long been a valorization of propositional knowledge and restless activity at the expense of other movements of the soul such as imagination, love, silence, and desire—and indeed at the expense of "knowing" itself, as the word is meant in the Bible. This is a key to why the integrity and power that changed the Roman Empire so radically has long been missing—and it is the Evangelical wing of the church I'm talking about. It is clear that attempted remedies for the situation have long been under way. The hungry explorers that make up the "emergent church" are part of that attempt; the popularity of writers such as John Eldredge is another. Nonetheless, most of us are yet captives to a culture that not only minimizes but cannot even detect spiritual reality, and we are often captive without realizing it. As one contemporary Christian writer poignantly expressed it, "we can no longer experience God, only our thoughts and feelings about God."

This is where spiritual theology comes in. Eugene Peterson in *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* defines spiritual theology as "the attention we give to lived theology." Lived, not just known and accepted. It seeks a way of life in which God can be known, known as you know your best friend or spouse, and where a "personal relationship" with Him is not just a cliché. Spiritual theology, as a term, is a relative newcomer, but that is only because it reflects relatively recent attempts in academia to unite the aforementioned division between theological knowledge and practice.

In the Eastern Church, theology and what we today call spirituality were never sundered, at least not programmatically, but in the West this split began in the 12th century. Before then, the

patristic writers' focus was either pastoral or argumentative. They were either preaching or reflecting upon the scriptures so as to help their flocks grow into spiritual maturity, or they were debating with those outside the faith. Under the influence of rediscovered Greek philosophy, however, theology became a more systematic enterprise, no longer merely consisting of reflections and commentaries on scripture and other traditional sources. In the 12th century, Thomas Aquinas hardened the split by dividing his theology into dogmatic and moral theology—the truths we are to believe and how we are to respond to those truths. The Reformation had the unfortunate by-product of encouraging further the independence of the reasoning faculties of the mind. By the time of Descartes in the 17th century, it was common that first principles no longer derived from faith, and the long march toward secularism was under way. Today, of course, one could be a professor of theology while being an atheist as well as a serial adulterer and intellectual property thief. Doubtless such a professor could also tell you all about the "spiritual path" he is on for his growth as a person. And it's also possible—and common?—to be an evangelical church member and never reach out in love beyond church and family, and be unfulfilled and bored to death to boot.

Starting in the 18th century, spiritual theology eventually became a well-establish field in Roman Catholicism, where it was confined until the 20th century. In the Protestant world, Dr. James Houston, founding principal of Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, has done much to revive spirituality and its formal study and make them both part of theological education. It is no accident that Eugene Peterson taught at Regent from 1993-1999, where he is now Professor Emeritus. (I enrolled at Regent College shortly afterwards and missed Peterson's tenure.) Eugene Peterson's calling as a pastor for 30 years as well as a writer, seems to have been to try to reunite spirituality and theology and thereby bring the life of the Trinity into the everyday world of timesheets and diapers. He is perhaps best known for *The Message,* his translation and paraphrase of the Bible into simple but striking and vigorous language. But he has also written 28 other well-received books, which have done much to renew spirituality among lay and clergy. Most of them have heretofore been structured as reflections on books of the

Bible. But the publication of *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* is momentous (I agree with *Christianity Today's* assessment) because Peterson has for the first time presented a comprehensive, even somewhat systematic, spiritual theology. It is the first of a projected five-book series of spiritual theology. (The second, *Eat This Book*, will be reviewed in the future for this site.) He is off to a great start, for this one is a generous masterpiece.

What spiritual theology is.

In the book's introduction Peterson says that theology and spirituality need each other. Without theology, spirituality becomes an undefined narcissistic journey where, as Leanne Payne said about Jungian spirituality, "your own heart becomes your Bible." Without spirituality, theology becomes dry as sawdust and tends to Pharisaism. Peterson grounds spiritual theology in a telos that includes both the future and the present:

> The end of all Christian belief and obedience, witness and teaching, marriage and family, leisure and work life, preaching and pastoral work is the *living* of everything we know about God: life, life, and more life. If we don't know where we are going, any road will get us there. But if we have a destination—in this case a life lived to the glory of God—there is a well-marked way, the Jesus-revealed Way. Spiritual theology is the attention that we give to the details of living life on this way. It is a protest against theology depersonalized into information about God; it is a protest against theology functionalized into a program of strategic planning for God.

It is the abstracted, dehumanizing, and "de-divinizing" modern way of doing things that has influenced the church and that Peterson has in his sights. It is the typical western approach to use technique and control to engineer products and get the results we want. These approaches, Peterson argues forcefully throughout the book, are diametrically opposed to authentic Christian living. For the authentic Christian life is sharing in the very personal life of the Trinity, the ongoing passionate love among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this book you will not find Six Easy Steps For Successful Christian Living here or the blueprint for a new Christian movement.

Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life" but, Peterson says, humanity often settles for "the truth" alone, which gets abstracted and intellectual; or it settles for "the way," and gets obsessed with behavior and social morality. Peterson seeks to return our attention and practice to

the more difficult *life*. It's a matter of bringing the gospel to bear in the snarly, uncompromising particularity of this very day between waking and sleeping.

The book's structure

Peterson carries out his spiritual theology in a tri-partite structure based on the model of the Trinity itself. Each of these parts describes a dimension of life where Christ "plays;" that is, where he dwells and where we find him and grow into him. (The title comes from a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins , which Peterson helpfully explicates, and "plays" has the double sense of playing on an instrument.) These dimensions are creation, history, and community. But first Peterson devotes a chapter to "Clearing the Playing Field."

"Clearing the Playing Field" is devoted to "harnessing" the "wild spiritual energies" around us today that are unguided by God's revelation in scripture. Peterson unclutters the current culture's junk surrounding spirituality and sets the foundation for what is to follow. This includes a brief version of three key scriptures that outline God's creative work as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and provide somewhat of an overture to the rest of the book. This section is full of invaluable antidotes to many of today's common misunderstandings of God and His ways.

One of the antidotes is Peterson's clarification of "spirituality." A history of the words "spiritual" and "spirituality" would coincide with the history of Christianity itself, so I daresay it is helpful to read Peterson's one-page summary. The word translated as "spiritual" seems to have been created by Paul in the New Testament; there and long after it referred to nothing other than the Holy Spirit; the "spiritual" person was one in whom the Spirit of God dwelt and expressed Himself. Today, however, the "abstracted vagueness of the word easily serves as a convenient cover for idolatry….reducing God to a concept or object that we can use for our benefit…" Drawing from John 3 and 4 and other scriptures Peterson dispenses with common misunderstandings: "Spirituality is not immaterial as opposed to material; not interior as opposed to exterior; not invisible as opposed to visible….What it properly conveys is living as opposed to dead." Likewise,

> Spirituality is not a body of secret lore,

> Spirituality has nothing to do with aptitude or temperament,
> Spirituality is not primarily about your or me; it is not about personal power or enrichment. It is about God.

This is one of the book's key themes: The Christian life is not about us but about God. God really is working every day (John 5:17) and it is our duty to find out and get in on what he has already got going, not try to engineer and cook up schemes on our own.

The exposition of the three dimensions where Christ "plays" makes up the rest of the book. Each of these three parts has the same elements, lending, if not exactly a system, a clear ordering structure. (See the table below.)

After an introductory section, a part of Christ's life (birth; death; resurrection) is reflected on. Then a threat to our living the Christian life is described. For example, the threat to living the Christian life in the context of creation is *gnosticism*. Gnosticism here is the belief that the "spiritual" life is essentially incorporeal and superior to the material world of bodies and matter. It is a pernicious and often unrecognized belief system into which the church and the surrounding culture regularly relapses. I have read many accounts of gnosticism but nowhere have I seen such a compact and applicable summary as Peterson's, as he describes how gnosticism remains perennially, seductively attractive to people while creating elites and inhibiting love.

In each section, the threat is followed by a scholarly yet imaginatively rich exposition of grounding scriptures; these make up the main mass of the book. The section ends with a description of the means for cultivating Fear-of-the-Lord.

	I. Christ Plays in Creation	**II. Christ Plays in History**	**III. Christ Plays in Community**
Jesus' life	Birth	Death	Resurrection
Threat	Gnosticism	Moralism	Sectarianism
Old Testament Grounding Text	Genesis 1-2	Exodus	Deuteronomy
New Testament	John	Mark	Luke/Acts

Grounding Text			
Means of Cultivating "Fear- of-the-Lord."	Sabbath and Wonder	Eucharist and Hospitality	Baptism and Love

Fear-of-the-Lord

Cultivating "Fear-of-the-Lord" is what Peterson describes as the most important action for the Christian life. It is no insight that "Fear-of-the-Lord" in any sense is not something discussed much less cultivated by our society. Neither will it be found in a seeker-sensitive church's marketing approach or a typical church's liturgy. "The word 'fear' seems to get us off on the wrong foot," Peterson dryly notes. But the oft-used Hebrew phrase that Peterson translates with hyphens is a "bound phrase," two Hebrew words bound together to create something that is different from the sum of their parts. It does not mean being in fear of God or His wrath. Not easily translated, "it means something more like a way of life in which human feelings and behavior are fused with God's being and revelation." Peterson's description of this culturally subversive state of being is worth quoting more fully:

> The primary way in which we cultivate fear-of-the-Lord is in prayer and worship—personal prayer and corporate worship. We deliberately interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to God, place ourselves intentionally in sacred space, in sacred time, in the holy presence—and wait. We become silent and still in order to listen and respond to what is Other than us. Once we get the hang of this we find that this can occur any place and any time. But prayer and worship provide the base…

This has long been one of the church's ways for knowing God Himself, not just our thoughts and feelings about God. Peterson's description is similar to what theologians call the *apophatic* approach in the Eastern Church. This is the practice of (temporarily at least) setting aside all we think we know of God in order to approach him in His essence, which is far beyond all human words and images.

Programs vs Persons

The "Cultivating Fear-of-the-Lord" topics make up the closest thing to the "how-to manual" that some readers may be hoping for. But performing Christian acts such as hospitality and

Eucharist without the mysterious element of Fear-of-the-Lord is exactly what the book argues against.

Fear-of-the-Lord makes us uncomfortable because "we don't like being in the dark, not knowing what to do," Peterson says. When we do get around to answering the question "What do we *do* to live the Christian life?" we often choose a path that avoids "prayerful involvement with God in the presence of God," by coming up with a "code of conduct."

For the same reasons the Christian church life has largely devolved into the promotion of certain beliefs and behavior, ideas and programs. However, these tendencies have at best an uneasy relation to the church's New Testament commandment to love. But "whoever heard of a class on love?" Peterson asks. "And whoever heard of a love program? And the reason is that love cannot be reduced to what can be taught in a classroom or what can be formulated in a program."

> What is dangerous is not ideas but the academic mind that abstracts both things and people from particular relationships into concepts. And what is dangerous is not programs but the programmatic mind that routinely sets aside the personal in order to more efficiently achieve an impersonal cause. These are not only dangerous but sacrilegious, for it is precisely relational particularities and personal intimacies that are at the center of our God-given, Holy-Spirit formed identities as the beloved who are commanded to love.

We serve a very personal God who made us in his image; to treat each other as anything less is akin to blasphemy. Our powers of technique and control that appear to have improved life on earth so much don't belong here.

A Desert Island Book

Much of the material I have summarized or quoted from *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* has been cultural critique. I focused on those areas because I think they would interest this site's reader. But taken alone they misrepresent the book. *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* is very much about solutions, not criticism. The main mass of the book, Peterson's expositions of scripture, seek to enlighten us about the glorious story God already has underway and how we are to be parts of it.

The weaknesses of the book are few and mostly miniscule. I wish, however, that in his section on the threat of sectarianism Peterson did make some acknowledgement that there *could* be a good reason for a worshipping community to divide, such as rank heresy or unrestrained immorality. But in the interest of full disclosure, I am an Episcopalian at a time when my church is discerning whether to leave its denomination.

Elsewhere Peterson makes a case that many friends of this site will find challenging. He argues that attempting to spread the faith or help the church by influencing a society's leaders has no Biblical or historical precedent and caters to a very worldly mentality. "Jesus and the Jesus community know that the way the gospel ms its way in the World have little to do with influence and wealth and power." I agree, and yet….Leaders have as much need as anyone to know God's grace. If the focus is not on saving a soul that will one day be naked before God, and we are focusing instead only on what that leader can provide beyond Himself, granted we have succumbed to a worldly utilitarianism and are no longer doing things the Lord's way. It may be that a converted leader can benefit the church (one could argue that the conversion of Rome's and other pagan nations' leaders leaves an ambivalent record regarding true spirituality), but that is up to God, not us.

If you are going to have only a few books of Christian spirituality or spirituality theology on your shelf, this should be one of them. It is firmly grounded in God's revealed Word. It unpacks these scriptures in such an enlightening way that it provides an "a-ha" moment on almost every page. The book goes a long way in unifying theology and spirituality, in both its form and its content, and in this way does much to heal some of the divisions of this age and recover what has been lost. But making Christ and not ourselves the center, cultivating Fear-of-the-Lord, is not a matter of innovative gimmicks. It is simply the ancient, traditional and universal practices of the church, such as sabbath, eucharist, and baptism, and the down-homey practices of wonder, hospitality, and love. But Peterson's persuasiveness and descriptive power fills these areas with new life; certainly they have already changed my habits. And the book does its work with the

kind of virile, creative and direct language that we might expect from the translator of *The Message.*

Introducing the book Peterson states "I don't have anything new to say; Christians already know all the basics simply by being alive and baptized" (4). But he says he does hope to get his readers "in on a little more of it," a little more of the Christian life. He succeeds. I can only hope we will choose to participate and not just read.

For further reading, a recent interview with Eugene Peterson:

- Spirituality for All The Wrong Reasons: An Interview with Eugene Peterson